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The 'Curse of Eguchi': 'Prostitute-ness' between Sexual Slavery and Agency in *Eguchi suieki* (1981) by Saegusa Kazuko

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Saegusa Kazuko is known for having dedicated her works and essays to women, and topics such as marriage, childbearing, and abortion are often central to her works. The writer's commitment to the defense of woman's emancipation, and her questioning of the values driving the division of male and female roles in society, is evident in her 1992 article 'Where Are Feminist Principles Required?'¹ Here, Saegusa quotes on the one hand Japanese contemporary thinkers and myths of ancient Greece, and stresses the illogicity and demagogic intent at the base of the stereotype of the male as protector of his children and bread-winner.² On the other hand, the archetype of the Woman as prostitute or mother is often emphasized not only in her essays but also in her works, as we will explore further below. In this paper, I would like to analyze the effect of the strategic use of politically incorrect views on the figure of the sex worker emerging from the text as embodiment of female agency through the analysis of the intertextuality with two other texts: an account of war stories, published in 1975 by the freelance writer Hirota Kazuko, and the noh drama *Eguchi*.

In the 1980s the controversy over comfort women in the Japanese military began. More specifically, it was in 1982 that a fierce debate was sparked when the Japanese Ministry of Education ordered the deletion from textbooks of every reference to war atrocities committed by Japanese soldiers.³ It is interesting to notice that only one year prior, Saegusa Kazuko had published *Eguchi suieki*, the story of an ex-'comfort woman'. The point is that the narrative provocatively focused not on the abusive system of coercive prostitution adopted by the Japanese military towards girls and young women of occupied Asian countries, which was at the center of the debate. Rather it chose to focus on the exceptional figure of the professional Japanese prostitute sent to the front of her own free will.

Eguchi suieki opens with the suicide of a sixty-year-old woman, Yukie, who drowns herself dressed in the kimono she wore when she used to work as a geisha. Then the narration shifts to the actual protagonist, Yūko, a forty-year-old pharmacist, the daughter of the suicidal former geisha. Yūko has been raised by her uncle's family and she only met her mother once when she was a child: in precisely that same place, at the temple of Eguchi along the river Yodo. However, we do not know until the end if this encounter is just a fantasy of Yūko's. After hearing about the incident, she arrives in the pleasure area of Eguchi—a small area of the city of Osaka in Higashi Yodogawa Ward—and that very day she has sex with a man she meets on the shore, an act inspired by the indulgent atmosphere of the place. In ancient times, this town was dedicated to pleasure and is the setting of the noh play *Eguchi*, which we will turn to later. Yūko, who had been told that her mother committed suicide at the age of forty, finds out that in reality her mother

1. Saegusa Kazuko, 'Feminizumu no kongen wo doko ni motomeru ka', *Gunzō* 10 (1992): 320–30.

2. Ibid., 325–6.

3. Hirofumi Hayashi, 'Disputes in Japan over the Japanese Military 'Comfort Women' System and its Perception in History', *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science (The Politics of History in Comparative Perspective)* 617 (May 2008): 126.

survived more than twenty years after that, and she actually died aged sixty. She is not entirely sure of the reason why she wants to do it, but Yūko decides to visit the environment where her mother had spent the last twenty years of her life after having broken with her abusive husband. Yukie had met him coming back from Singapore, where she had been working for two years during the war as a comfort woman for Japanese soldiers.

With the exception of one chapter, the entire narration is close to the protagonist Yūko's point of view. Even if we cannot use narratological categories, which are based on European languages, the work is written in a mixture of third- and first-person narrator, which at times recalls free indirect speech and at times free direct speech without the use of graphic signs, allowing closer proximity to the figural stance. Nevertheless, it is difficult to define the overall point of view, because there are many ambiguous passages in the narration. This is also due to the presence of voices and thoughts attributed to dead people, where it actually remains unclear whether they are imagined by Yūko or if they really are echoes from the afterworld.

The only chapter not corresponding to this kind of narration is the one entitled 'Fumi', the name of Yukie's best friend who is the owner of a bar in the area of Eguchi, and who narrates the entire story of Yūko's mother in a monologue-like first-person narration. This narratorial choice is also particular, since Fumi narrates in Kansai dialect and in the colloquial polite form of *desu-masu*. This style gives an effect of closeness to Fumi's thought, and gives the reader the impression that they are listening to a truthful voice, since she is the only direct witness of those facts. The narration emphasizes that Yukie always used to say that the time she spent as a geisha before, and comfort woman later, were the best she had ever had in her life. Fumi stresses also the fact that her friend's mistake was to get married after that, and not to live a free life as an entertainer.

After that, there is a scene that portrays the last homage of Yūko to her mother, paid at the shore of the river where she died, in the middle of a plain of reeds. Suddenly, she feels a voice inside, which is neither feminine nor masculine. It is not a single voice, but a polyphonic ensemble, and it is not clear where it comes from.⁴ Most likely those voices are a figment of Yūko's imagination, but nevertheless in their evanescence they recall the apparitions of the souls typical of the *noh* of dream, *mugen noh*. In this scene, the perception of Yūko is enlarged and thanks to the dialogue-like intervention of the voices we can see the point of view of her mother, her father, and her mother's alcoholic husband, as they explain their version of the facts that led Yukie to commit suicide. In the end, there is a rape scene on the shore. A young girl is raped by a group of boys, but Yūko decides it is not her duty to help her, adding the cynical excuse that all women must resign themselves to men's violence. The girl falls into the river and dies. There, Yūko has visions directly inspired by the representation of the drama *Eguchi*, in which she listens to *noh* drums and flutes, which announce the spirit of the courtesan of Eguchi ascending to the sky on a boat, overlapping with the image of her mother and later that of the raped girl.

We could say that the structure of the work, mainly focused on Yūko's thoughts about her dead mother and herself, shifts between present facts and past memories. The narration is complicated by the continuous insertion of different stories regarding other women—first and foremost her mother Yukie—which becomes possible through Yūko's imagination.

It is especially the intertextuality with *noh* that allows an intermingling of time and space, ending up with an ambiguous mixture of scenes, flashbacks, prolepsis, and shifts in space which create a continuous dream-like atmosphere. Sugii calls this 'wandering of the narration' (*katarite*

4. Sugii Kazuko, 'Saegusa Kazuko: 'kioku' to 'yume' to', *Kokubungaku kaishaku to kanshō* 71, no. 6 (2006): 140.

no fuyūsei 語り手の浮遊性) and argues that this style emphasizes what I will speak about later: the rupture of the single personal identity, to focalize on a more universal image.⁵

Hirota's Reportage as Betrayed Metatext

The documentary 'Recorded Testimony: Military Comfort Women and Nurses' (*Shōgen kiroku: Jūgun ianfu-kangofu* 証言記録 従軍慰安婦・看護婦, hereafter *Shōgen kiroku*) recounts the war experiences of several comfort women based on interviews conducted by Hirota Kazuko in the early 1970s.⁶ I will concentrate on the use of metatextuality here, because I find it to be crucial to the narration of *Eguchi suieki*.

As argued by the scholar Yonaha Keiko, the character of Yukie was inspired by the story of Kikumarū, a former geisha turned comfort woman during the war, which is collected in *Shōgen kiroku*.⁷ Both Kikumarū and Yukie were indeed comfort women serving high-ranking soldiers, and therefore they were treated differently from prostitutes for ordinary soldiers. The documentary is introduced in the text as the occasion for Yūko to find out what the word 'comfort woman' means. As a child, she often heard the word associated with her mother, but she did not understand what it meant. When she finds *Shōgen kiroku* in a bookstore, she starts rethinking the life of her biological mother, Yukie, or 'Someka', her stage name as a geisha. This happens because the interviews in this book delve deep into the psyche of a comfort woman, to the point that 'there were many parts difficult to understand for Yūko but by thinking that also her mother had been walking pretty much the same path, she realized that a strange sense of solidarity was growing in herself'.⁸ In particular, the protagonist is struck by the fact that Hirota, after collecting many stories, realized that the sadness accompanying many comfort women's lives was not due to the memories of the front, but to the discrimination they were subjected to after the war.⁹

Some paragraphs of Hirota's book are directly quoted, albeit with cuts, additions or slightly different wording but which masquerade as the original. Among the changes that Saegusa makes to the quoted text, there are three which are particularly meaningful. First of all, Saegusa often uses the term 'man' instead of the 'soldier' of the original, so as to generalize the condition of prostitution, not only focusing on war times. After the provocative declaration by Hirota that the fact of having sex with a different man every thirty minutes was probably not particularly sad or embarrassing for the comfort women, there is one sentence that stands out. Saegusa, disguised as Hirota, adds: 'This, being myself a woman, in a way was a "dreadful discovery" (*osoroshii hakken* 怖ろしい発見). Nevertheless, I thought that I could not have contact [with those women] avoiding that question.'¹⁰ The use of the expression 'dreadful discovery' in that exact place in the text implies a fear of women to accept and understand the 'prostitute inside them', what in other essays that I will quote later Saegusa calls *shōfusei* 娼婦性, embodying the potential freedom they have.

In the original version, after the description of a typical encounter between a comfort woman and a soldier, in which the soldier would bring sweets as a present and say 'thank you' after

5. Ibid, 132.

6. Hirota Kazuko, *Shōgen kiroku: Jūgun ianfu-kangofu. Senjo ni ikita onna no dōkoku* (Tōkyō: Shin jinbutsu ōraisha, 1975).

7. Yonaha Keiko, *Kōki 20 seiki Josei bungaku ron* (Tōkyō: Shōbunsha, 2014), 174.

8. Saegusa Kazuko, 'Eguchi suieki', in *Sumidagawa gen* (Tōkyō: Shūeisha, 1982), 56. All translations from Japanese in this article are, unless otherwise specified, my own.

9. Ibid., 56.

10. Ibid., 57.

coitus, Saegusa adds a sentence which is not present in Hirota's text: 'after speaking with the male part I did confirm that the "intuition" I had was not wrong'.¹¹

Hereafter, there is another meaningful modification to the original: Hirota assumes that the sadness of the soldiers was superior to the sadness felt by the comfort women. For 'sadness' (*kanashisa* 悲しさ) Saegusa substitutes 'comicality' (*kokkeisa* 滑稽さ) when referring to the soldiers, ultimately saying that the comicality of the soldiers was stronger than the sadness of the comfort women.

For the comfort women, was it not that the 'sadness' of their own situation was exceeded by the [sadness] ridiculousness of the soldiers' appearance, as they clenched a ticket in each of their hands and waited tenaciously in line for an experience which would be over almost as soon as they entered the private room separated only by a single sheet of rush matting?¹²

Here we have the explanation of the 'intuition' just mentioned, where Hirota—in Saegusa's version—has supposedly understood that the stereotype we generally have of war prostitutes is false and that not all of them are unhappy. This substitution has a double effect: on the one hand, it renders the chagrin associated with the comfort women lighter, and on the other hand it creates the idea that the Japanese comfort women Hirota interviewed did not feel inferior to the soldiers. If anything, they felt in a higher position, since they were providing a necessary service. *Eguchi suieki* continues with the quotation from *Shōgen kiroku* which assumes, on the contrary, that a prostitute working during peace time does not feel in such position, and the fact that she is paid for her services allows her clients to exercise power over her and to feel superior to her.¹³

Considering this metatextual use analyzed above, in Saegusa's work the counterfeit quotation of *Shōgen kiroku* has the strong and provocative effect of denying the sadness and shame associated to prostitutes—especially war prostitutes—and stresses, by contrast, the privileged position some of the comfort women enjoyed at the front.

Kikumarū-san's real story reported in *Shōgen kiroku* reveals that some Japanese comfort women lived in a more privileged environment compared to foreign comfort women, but also to Japanese women who were assigned to lower-ranking soldiers.¹⁴ In her interview, Kikumarū admits that on the way back home after the end of their service, she was very sad and this was because as a comfort woman of high-ranking officials she felt well treated and valued. Moreover, from Kikumarū's interview it is clear that comfort women destined to serve high-ranking officials had a much better life, not least because they did not have to have sex with multiple men per day, but only one per day.¹⁵ But the interesting thing is that even if the other woman being interviewed (called by the false name of Suzuki-san) had been destined to service ordinary soldiers, thus being forced to have sex with a different man every thirty minutes, she declares that she does not have a bad memory of those times. This part is also meaningfully quoted in *Eguchi suieki*.¹⁶

Neither Kikumarū nor Yukie has a bad memory of the two years spent as comfort women and, on the contrary, they both remember that time as the most pleasant time of their life.¹⁷ On the

11. Ibid., 58.

12. Ibid., 58. Underlined word emphasizes the substitution.

13. Hirota, *Shōgen kiroku*, 55–6, and Saegusa, 'Eguchi suieki', 58.

14. Hirota, *Shōgen kiroku*, 109.

15. Ibid., 51–2.

16. Saegusa, 'Eguchi suieki', 57.

17. Hirota, *Shōgen kiroku*, 104, and Saegusa, 'Eguchi suieki', 83.

basis of the above reasons, we cannot link their suicide to the trauma of the war and both the characters committed suicide thirty years—or more in the case of Yukie—after the end of the war. Reading *Shōgen kiroku*, it is evident that Kikumaru always regretted her choice of becoming a comfort woman, because knowing this fact meant that no man had the courage to marry her and she was condemned to a life of solitude and poverty, which she duly emphasized in the letter she left behind.¹⁸

The biggest difference is that whilst Kikumaru's suicide can be explained by the sadness she experienced through living alone and her sense of inferiority after coming back from the front, Yukie's reason to commit suicide is more complex. In the narration, it is not explicit why Yukie decides to throw herself into the Yodo River dressed in her kimono. In the letter she leaves behind, there is only one reference to the 'alcoholic man' she married, admitting that she pities him and what happened was her fault.¹⁹ Later on in the narration it becomes clear that her 'fault' is to have been so naïve as to believe the things he would say to blackmail her.

Actually, by reading *Shōgen kiroku* it is clear that in contrast to the experience of Kikumaru and Suzuki, there were other comfort women who faced a hard time because they were not as well treated, especially women from Okinawa or Korea, obliged to become sex slaves.²⁰ On the other hand, in *Eguchi suieki* it is evident that the situation of most comfort women who suffered terrible humiliation, both foreigners and Japanese, is expressly not mentioned.²¹

Although the debate is still not resolved and whether some Japanese war prostitutes really were treated differently, akin to well paid escorts or not, the more important point is that Saegusa consciously chose—we recall at the beginning of 1980s—to avoid speaking about most of the comfort women, who were raped, objectified, and mistreated, in order to concentrate on the freedom gained by those allegedly 'first-class' prostitutes, in a historical context where the concept of 'sex worker' as a person who chose prostitution over another profession, was not yet popular.²²

Only two years before Hirota's documentary, the male journalist Senda Kakō published a bestseller on the topic of comfort women, mainly concentrating on interviews with former Japanese doctors, soldiers, and some Japanese former comfort women. The title used the same expression, *jūgun ianfu* (military comfort women), and it was because of this book that the expression came into common use.²³ His reportage focuses primarily on the issue of Korean

18. Hirota, *Shōgen kiroku*, 104–6, 153.

19. Saegusa, 'Eguchi suieki', 77.

20. Hirota, *Shōgen kiroku*, 26, 57.

21. From the multi-layered debates on comfort women, which are intertwined with discussions about prostitution in general, what emerges is that 'the widespread conventional belief that prostitution is wrong and should be legally prohibited persists', as pointed out in Ayala Klemperer-Markman, *PostGender. Gender, Sexuality and Performativity in Japanese Culture*, ed. Ayelet Zohar (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009), 230. For a consideration of the double standard used towards comfort women dividing previous prostitutes and 'pure victims' see Ueno Chizuko, 'The Politics of Memory: Nation, Individual and Self', trans. Jordan Sand, *History and Memory* 11, no. 2 (Fall/Winter 1999). In *Ianfu mondai* (Tōkyō: Chikuma shobō, 2014), trans. David Noble as *The Comfort Women. Historical, Political, Legal, and Moral Perspectives* (Tōkyō: International House of Japan, 2016), 30–5, Kumagai Naoko as well does not deny the fact that many Japanese women who became comfort women were already working as prostitutes and that they probably were volunteers. She, together with many abolitionist feminists, points out instead that prostitution itself, even if pursued of free will, is a form of slavery and analyzes the comfort-women system as an extension of licensed prostitution in times of peace.

22. Kikuchi Natsuno, 'Sekku waku gainen no rironteki shatei. Feminizumu riron ni okeru baibaishun to kaji rōdō', *Nagoya City University Graduate School of Humanities and Social Sciences Studies in Humanities and Cultures* 24 (2015): 42–3.

23. Senda Kakō, *Jūgun-ianfu. 'Koe naki onna' hachi man nin no kokuhatsu* (Tōkyō: Futabasha, 1973).

comfort women, and it provides a strong image of the comfort woman as victim. On the other hand, in Hirota's text the focus is on Japanese comfort women, even if she does suggest that Korean comfort women were in a much worse position than Japanese ones. The reason why Saegusa decided to use Hirota's book instead of the bestseller by Senda as a metatext could be because it was more suitable as inspiration to depict the life of a Japanese comfort woman. In my opinion, however, it was especially because Hirota remains ambivalent towards the idea of comfort women as victims. The ambivalence extends to Hirota telling stories of quarrels between comfort women over a soldier, or that after having paid back their debts, which was the main reason for becoming a comfort woman in the first place, many Japanese comfort women were said to have had the freedom to decide whether to stay with one particular soldier or not. Normally they would have had one lover, with whom they would spend the last period at the front together, pretending to be a couple.²⁴ Hirota's account does not deny the darkness and sadness that marked the existence of Japanese comfort women, but she very much stresses the idea that for some of them it was their choice to go to the front and they regretted it only for the humiliation they suffered after coming back, not whilst living there. In an article published in 2015 for the Violence Against Women in War Research Action Center, Hirota resumes Kikumar's and Suzuki-san's story, stressing again the fact that their experience was different from many other comfort women's because of a question of nationality and timing.²⁵

From what we know about Saegusa's personal inclinations, she held a feminist view of society and argued the need for fighting androcentric society.²⁶ So why would she emphasize comfort women's relative positive experiences when it risked the weight of war crimes and minimizing sexual slavery? I think that the female image she created in *Eguchi suieki* has been contrasted with the victim image with a literary purpose, which is very distant to the intent of revisionists. Saegusa can operate this sensitive choice of hiding the cruelty at the base of the system exactly because she uses the literary vessel. In other words, the freedom given to Saegusa by means of literature is not only that of shifting time and space, but above all that of choosing a narrow and exceptional point of view on the dramatic topic of comfort women, and strategically concentrating on it without the risk of hurting the sensitivity of the majority of former comfort women, actual victims of sexual slavery. The readership at which the work is aimed is supposed to accept the explicit incorrectness of hiding the criminal aspects of the sexual slavery system, in a sort of fictional pact where they can sympathize with the comfort woman not as a victim, but as a figure of resistance.

Prostitute-ness vs Mother-ness

The focus on the familiarity and almost mother-like pity that Yukie felt towards young Japanese soldiers destined to die soon is the main point in common with the real stories of Japanese comfort women collected by Hirota Kazuko.²⁷ It is my contention that this reportage's quotation not only is used to deny the idea of the comfort woman as victim, but also it represents the non-duality of mother-ness and prostitute-ness, or victim and perpetrator which most likely did not emerge from Senda's book. I want to quote here a meaningful conversation between Saegusa and the male writer Gotō Meisei,²⁸ where they talk about the theme of the eternal Woman, constructed through

24. Hirota, *Shōgen kiroku*, 72–3.

25. Hirota Kazuko, 'Nihonjin 'ianfu' no sengo. Kikumar-san no baai', in *Nihonjin 'ianfu'. Aikokushin to Jinshinbaibai to*, ed. Nishino Rumiko and Onozawa Akane (Tōkyō: Violence Against Women in War Research Action Center, 2015).

26. Saegusa, 'Feminizumu', 326.

27. Hirota, *Shōgen kiroku*, 62.

28. Gotō Meisei and Saegusa Kazuko, "'Onna' wo megutte', *Kokubungaku kaishaku to kanshō (onna to ha nanika)* 46, no. 2 (1981): 148.

the centuries by male culture as a binary image, either tempting as a prostitute or trustful and caring as a mother. Gotō argues that it is anachronistic to depict in literature women who are in line only with a single type (either prostitute-like or mother-like), and that it is time to have a broader vision. Saegusa agrees entirely with this, saying that 'it is necessary to have a prostitute side to become mothers' and adds that she has been thinking a lot about this topic and that she is intent on writing about many aspects of Woman, not only about individual women.²⁹ This is precisely the impression that emerges from *Eguchi suieki*. Considering that the conversation with Gotō took place in 1981, it can be safely assumed that Saegusa's thoughts about the archetype of the prostitute and the mother, formulated in this period, influenced the narration of her literary works.

Eguchi suieki's protagonist, Yūko, comes to the area Eguchi to find out about her mother and about herself, too. She feels that even without knowing her mother, she has inherited some feature from her and through the narration we discover this similarity, which seems to be more a proof that in every woman many aspects of Woman coexist rather than a confirmation of genetic transmission. First of all, the similarity between Yūko and her mother is with regards to their relationship with men, which can only be satisfactory if it is temporary to the point that the daughter defines herself as a 'prostitute who does not do it for money'.³⁰ We have passages where, as Sugii argues,³¹ Yūko feels a sense of oneness with her dead mother thanks to the prostitute-ness inside her:

Men passed through her body. When she opened her body to these men, Yūko always felt a strange sensation inside, maybe even compassion, sweep over her. To Yūko, men were always of a temporary nature. Even if she had a relatively long relationship, because she saw them ultimately as temporary, she was able to receive them in a yielding way.³²

Sugii opposes the focus that Yonaha Keiko puts on *shōfusei* in her chapter dedicated to *Eguchi suieki* in the book *Contemporary Female Writers* published in 1987.³³ I do support the idea that the concept of *shōfusei* living in all women is at the base of this universalization that is operated through the narration and stressed by the metatextual use of the noh drama *Eguchi*, thanks to the ambiguity of time and space accomplished through noh.

Yonaha points out that the noh quotation gives to the location—the river port Eguchi—the power to enhance women's prostitute-ness. It is sitting on the shore of the area of Eguchi to celebrate her mother that Yūko realizes that the sensation her mother had towards the soldiers she slept with, behaving like a warm and caring mother-like figure for those soldiers destined to die soon, was not different from the one she has when she spends the night with someone. It is precisely through the realisation that the dichotomy of prostitute and mother coexists in every woman that Yūko understands her error in thinking of her prostitute-ness as a manifestation of freedom:

'But it's the same thing, isn't it?' Yūko's thoughts would wander back and forth. If the soldiers were going to die tomorrow, she could not say that the man who was with her at that moment was not going to also die tomorrow. She used to think that sexual intercourse was the result of men's and women's sadness. But now, suddenly, she realized that men and women copulate

29. Ibid., 147.

30. Saegusa, 'Eguchi suieki', 61.

31. Sugii, 'Kioku' to 'yume' to', 140.

32. Translated in Joan E. Ericson, *Woman Critiqued. Translated Essays on Japanese Women Writing*, ed. Rebecca L. Copeland (University of Hawai'i Press, 2006), 150.

33. Yonaha Keiko, *Gendai joryū sakka ron* (Tōkyō: Shinchōsha, 1987), 173.

because they could die tomorrow. In this sense, it is an action which is triggered by a higher power. If we say that sexual intercourse is an action taken by limited bodies in order to participate in an endless life, it's all too easy. However, she found her figure indescribably sad when nature's power moved inside her body.³⁴

Speaking about prostitute-ness, Yonaha argues that in order to have the *sei* 性 (-ness) of *shōfusei*, it is imperative to feel pity for the men and to accept the role of comforting them.³⁵ In a more recent work, Yonaha compares it to the bodhisattva Fugen at the centre of the second part of the *noh* play, who has to renounce Enlightenment to help other people in the world.³⁶

Nevertheless, in my reading, the role of the comforting Woman is not the principle at the base of the *shōfusei* which Yūko feels within herself at the beginning of the narrative. From Yūko's perspective the prostitute is the embodiment of the fight against normativity, which sees marriage and maternity as the ultimate goal of a woman in society. For Yūko it is the only way in which women are able to escape the confines of marriage and express their sexual desire freely. However, as we will see, she ultimately understands that she is not completely detached from this traditional female figure of the caring mother and wife. It is precisely the realization that prostitute-ness is not a feasible way of escaping the patriarchal system that makes her resign and finally commit suicide.

An extensive memory of the dialogue between herself and a former lover, emerging in the narration, brings her strong anti-marriage stance into focus. He wonders why she is so stubbornly against marriage and she replies: 'If I want to be happy, I am not going to marry. When I will be prepared to sacrifice my potentialities, my capacity for living, my freedom, then I will start thinking of marriage.'³⁷

On the same topic, Joan Ericson quotes Saegusa's collection of essays *Farewell to the Age of Men*, where she declares: 'If a woman seeks pure love, she should not bear children even though she becomes involved with a man. If she has sex with a man in order to have a child, she should not look for love.' Purity is precisely what Fumi, Yukie's friend, stresses when she speaks to Yūko about her mother. She uses the term *kirei* きれい, clean or beautiful, associated with the figure of the prostitute, who takes care of the well-being of many men, contrary to married women, who 'protect only one man during their entire life'.³⁸

In the same conversation with Gotō, Saegusa agrees on the limitation of freedom which is represented by the institution of marriage, stressing its meaning as merely a contract to make children and assist each other in old age.³⁹ On the contrary, Saegusa and Gotō look at the freedom associated with the prostitute's image, who is outside of the system, and therefore does not have to comply with any social rule or family obligation. The male writer—quoting Saikaku—provocatively says that women have always been regarded as prostitutes and Saegusa confirms the idea, explicitly positing the theory that throughout history prostitutes have taken on the role of

34. Saegusa, 'Eguchi suieki', 94.

35. Yonaha, *Gendai*, 170–1.

36. Yonaha, *Kōki 20 seiki*, 175.

37. Saegusa, 'Eguchi suieki', 60.

38. Saegusa, 'Eguchi suieki', 84.

39. Gotō and Saegusa, "'Onna' wo megutte', 140.

making 'blossom the freedom that wives could not have'. She even goes so far as to suggest that prostitutes do not have to force themselves to have sex with clients, implying that they enjoy it.⁴⁰

It is important to clarify here that Saegusa's use of the concept of the prostitute-ness of Woman and the freedom associated with this aspect is always profoundly connected more to anti-marriage stances than to a real idealization of the prostitute's work, which is not present in her essays or works, as far as I am concerned. While there have been a few manifestations of sex work feminism looking at prostitution as a personal choice of the single woman, Saegusa never expresses herself in this sense.⁴¹ What she manifests through her essays, but first and foremost through *Eguchi suieki*, is a focus on prostitute-ness as one aspect of women's self, a possible alternative for the woman to step out of the 'wife' and 'mother' image. She does this in the most politically incorrect and provocative way, by telling positively of an experience not only of prostitution, but of wartime prostitution, which is generally accepted in a feminist context as a kind of slavery. By strategically focusing attention in the narration on the topic of prostitution, she frequently compares it with marriage, stressing in this way the inequality of the marriage system. What is not visible—a happy marriage tale—comes to the fore strongly to denounce the problems at the base of the family system in wartime and post-war Japan as well.

The Courtesan of Eguchi

The other element which is fundamental to the narration, as it suggests the idea of the prostitute as an aspect of eternal femininity, is the metatextuality with the noh *Eguchi*, whose *shite* (main actor) takes the role of the spirit of the courtesan of Eguchi.

The story of *Eguchi* is set in the same actual area of Eguchi in Ōsaka—the stage for Saegusa's work—which used to be a famous pleasure quarter in the Heian and Kamakura periods for travelers on their way from Kyōto to a place called Tsu no Kuni. They would normally travel by boat over the Yodo River, which is at the center of both the novel *Eguchi suieki* and the noh play *Eguchi* which inspired it.

The noh drama *Eguchi* by Kan'ami is a mixture of two ancient *setsuwa*, which are Buddhist tales that appear in more than one collection.⁴² The one featuring in the first part is the legend of the famous traveler-monk Saigyō arriving in the pleasure city of Eguchi and asking one *asobime* (a courtesan who can sing and perform) if she can have him stay. She rejects him, adding that since he is a man who neglects worldly pleasures he should not rest at a courtesan's place. The second part of the noh focuses on a *setsuwa* dedicated to the holy man Shōkū, and concerns the association of an *asobime* with the bodhisattva Fugen. This theme of the encounter between the courtesan and the monk finds many variants in *setsuwa* and noh, and the courtesan as avatar of the bodhisattva is a Buddhist *topos*.⁴³ Both, in Faure's argument, are said to have been an 'attempt to normalize the courtesan and to use her for Buddhist propaganda'. He explains as follows: 'Even if the motif of the courtesan as bodhisattva emerges against the background of shamanistic beliefs in the incantatory power of the *imayō* [the sacred chant of the *asobime*], however, it may have marked a radical departure from the *imayō* genre inasmuch as it was recuperated by an aesthetic theory or a Buddhist soteriology'.⁴⁴

40. Ibid., 147.

41. Klemperer-Markman, *PostGender*, 230.

42. Ikegami Yasuo, Yūjo to Bosatsu: nō 'Eguchi' ni tsuite no oboegaki, *The MGU Journal of Liberal Art Studies: Karuchuru* 6, no. 1 (2012): 1; Bernard Faure, *The Power of Denial. Buddhism, Purity and Gender* (Princeton University Press, 2003,) 265, 387n65.

43. Faure, *The Power*, 264–7.

44. Ibid., 267.

The protagonist of this drama is not the only courtesan figure we encounter in the world of noh. For example, the female protagonists of the noh dramas *Kagekiyo* and *Hanjo* are both courtesans, and more broadly speaking we know that the figure of the *shirabyōshi* (or the female wandering artist in general), popular during the Kamakura period and incorporated artistically into noh such as *Yoshino Shizuka*, *Futari Giō*, *Funa benkei*, *Futari shizuka*, and *Hotoke no Hara*,⁴⁵ is intimately linked to prostitution and sensual pleasure, as Faure explains.⁴⁶ Nevertheless, while in all those dramas the courtesan is just a mainly aestheticized female character (such as in *Hanjo*) in the noh drama *Eguchi* the courtesan is presented precisely because of her position as a peddler of flesh, and therefore a sinner. Terry Kawashima argues that although the figure of the courtesan is ambivalent in many periods of Buddhist history, in medieval history it was mainly perceived as sinful.⁴⁷ Michele Marra emphasizes that it is precisely in the medieval period that the idea of defilement becomes prominent, to the extent that the ‘Buddhist philosophy of detachment from worldly concerns’ started including defilement and explains:

We witness the assimilation within the framework of Buddhist philosophy of non-Buddhist beliefs that presented female defilement as a potentially threatening element to social stability. The domestication of such beliefs and the conquest over the ‘pollution’ of the female body that Buddhist mythographers achieved by transforming the courtesan into a Buddha-to-be (*bodhisattva*) led to a restorationist act of order in which the danger of defiled margins was silenced and erased in the name of a process of spiritual realization.⁴⁸

The intertextuality with the noh *Eguchi* reinforces the ambivalence of the courtesan. In the first part of the noh, via the encounter with Saigyō, by refusing to have him stay overnight, the courtesan has the honourable role of preventing a monk fall into sin. On the other hand, she contradicts him, so she represents a woman's agency in the face of male hegemony. In particular, following Ikegami Yasuo's theory, the character of Saigyō can be interpreted as a trickster, whose persona helps others reach harmony.⁴⁹ In this play in particular, the courtesan's ‘clever reply’ (*takumi na ōshū* 巧みな応酬) enhances the gap between the monk's intention to humiliate the courtesan, and her skill in making him not only respect her, but realize her sagacity and assume an inferior and comical position. The tanka poem taken from this first part of the noh quoted in *Eguchi suieki* is:

Twilight shadows veil the sight of me, as dimly glimmering, I am soon gone among the river's sinuous bend. たそかれに、たたずむ影はほのぼのと、見え隠れなる川隈⁵⁰

This is a quotation in *Eguchi suieki* of the spirit of the courtesan's words. It is narrated right before the revelation of the identity of her spirit and after her argument that the monk *waki* (second actor) should not believe in Saigyō's poem which insists on the scorn received by the courtesan. The spirit insists on her *bona fide* intention in not receiving Saigyō, so that he could stay far from temptation by worldly passions. The quotation of this tanka occurs twice: in the first instance, Yūko is trying to remember the only time her aunt brought her to the town of Eguchi to meet her

45. Barbara Ruch, ‘The Other Side of Culture in Medieval Japan’, in *The Cambridge History of Japan*, ed. Kozo Yamamura (Cambridge University Press 2008 [1990]), 3:530.

46. Faure, *Power*, 258–64.

47. Terry Kawashima, *Writing Margins: The Textual Construction of Gender in Heian and Kamakura Japan* (Harvard University Press, 2001), 65.

48. Michele Marra, ‘The Buddhist Mythmaking of Defilement: Sacred Courtesans in Medieval Japan’, *Journal of Asian Studies* 52, no. 1 (Feb. 1993): 50–1.

49. Ikegami, ‘Yūjo to Bosatsu’, 4.

50. Saegusa, ‘Eguchi suieki’, 20, 70.

mother, and she wonders if it is a dream or reality that her mother came on a boat through the mist, as she remembers. She also asks herself what it is that she is looking for, and realizes that it is 'something different from her mother. What she desired was something behind the mother's boat, something big which was difficult to determine.'⁵¹ The second time the same *tanka* is quoted, Yūko realizes that what she dreamt is not her mother's but the courtesan of *Eguchi*'s boat. And after the quotation she imagines herself on the boat during the scene of the sexual encounter with the man she meets on the shore. In both cases, I believe that *Eguchi*'s quotation is a direct reference to the womanly prostitute-ness. The 'big and difficult to determine' thing that she is looking for is indeed not her mother, but what her mother represents: a womanly free way of thinking and living, embodied by the courtesan's boat.

In the second scene of the *noh* play, the courtesan is transformed into Fugen Bosatsu and there she embodies the deity which is sacrificed for others, as argued above. Ericson explains the image of Woman-bodhisattva as a drastic reversal of the male–female power relationship, where 'men who are rescued through mercy cannot be men who control and subordinate women', and where the greatest potentiality is embodied by women who do not bear children, but dedicate their energies to the caring of many men.⁵² Nevertheless, in my reading, this role of the 'healing' woman being used for a male's pleasure or rescue is exactly what Yūko wants to fight. It is precisely disillusionment with the myth of the powerful and merciful prostitute-woman that will bring Yūko to suicide, as we will see.

When Yūko sees the figure of Fugen Bosatsu, she is celebrating a second vigil for the relief of her mother's spirit on the shores of the river where Yukie died. This scene is important because the ambivalence of her position as the daughter of a prostitute is explicit here. On the one hand, she has the will to give relief to her mother's spirit, but on the other hand she admits ironically that she has not thought to care for her own spirit, implying that she herself has brought upon herself a disturbed life and she needs appeasement as well.⁵³ Even if by choice, the life she has lived is clearly not a happy one, and women's lives will not be so until their position changes, as suggested in the sentence: 'The life of my mother has been sad, and also the life of my aunt. Then mine, too.'⁵⁴

The image of the courtesan, who rides the sky transformed into Fugen Bosatsu through *henjo nanshi*, the rebirth of a female body into a male body before attaining Enlightenment, represents Yūko's breaking of the illusion that female defilement has the power to threaten social stability. Indeed, this image comes right after the scene where Yūko imagines the mother's suicide, which precedes the death of the raped girl. The two scenes remind the reader of the void left by patriarchal mechanisms, and the location of *Eguchi* functions as *fil rouge* for the Woman's image: the girl, the mother, the ancient courtesans, and finally herself.

Identification with the Universal Woman

What emerges very clearly from this work is actually the affinity of the female characters with other female characters and of the male characters among themselves. They are all linked by an invisible thread which contributes to the construction of a perpetual image of Woman and Man, which is at the same time ambivalent yet universal. The figure of the courtesan and the mother overlap through the image of the boat, and later it is Yūko who finds herself on the boat, so that

51. *Ibid.*, 20.

52. Ericson, *Woman Critiqued*, 150.

53. Saegusa, 'Eguchi suieki', 102.

54. *Ibid.*, 63.

the mother, the courtesan of Eguchi, and herself can become one.⁵⁵ Yūko feels that the image of the mother overlaps eventually with the raped girl in the last part of the narration.⁵⁶ In the end, every female character seems to be part of the same image of the eternal Woman. Sugii Kazuko in her analysis of *Eguchi Suieki* argues that the identification of oneself with the other is the principal result of the intertextuality with *mugen noh*, the *noh* of dream, where realism is broken to make it possible that experiences lived by another person—the mother, the raped girl—are felt by Yūko.⁵⁷

Also the statue of the bodhisattva Jizō, which appears many times throughout the narration, is linked to the only memory of the encounter with her mother that Yūko supposedly had in her early childhood. However, in the last scene it becomes another reference to Woman divided between prostitute-ness and motherhood. The narration stresses the fact that there were only women visiting Jizō's temples for *mizuko kuyō*, the memorial services to appease aborted children. The choice of abortion again links Yūko—who had an abortion when she was young—and her mother, who by abandoning her is said to have committed a kind of abortion,⁵⁸ with all the women who decided to refuse the role ascribed to them by society. A passerby, looking at Yūko's and the girl's drowned bodies, comments on the fact that it could be because of the 'curse of Eguchi' (*Eguchi no tatari* 江口の祟り) that in that precise place many women encountered bad luck and chose to die in the river.

Not only is the woman's figure universalized. For men, the comparison of the young rapists and the soldiers facing death is explicit, with bloodshot eyes and being dominated by 'a sad animal-like desire'.⁵⁹ The soldiers visiting the comfort women with sweets as if they were going on a day trip, the rapists, the drunken husband of Yukie, Yūko's sexual partner on the shore who is frightened of having contracted a disease knowing that Yūko is the daughter of a comfort woman,⁶⁰ even Saigyō, who is refused by the courtesan of Eguchi with a witty reply based on Buddhist learnings; all of these men share the *kokkeisa* I underlined above and take on a comical and pitiful aspect. Even the youngsters, who have perpetrated a monstrous crime by raping a girl to death, are in a way justified by their frailty. The spirit of the dead girl in Yūko's imagination admits that she is not angry but sad for them. The strategy of a politically incorrect stance here is obviously used for a political aim: to point the finger at the fact that the same sadness will always repeat itself throughout history until societal norms and contradictions change on the whole, and not only with regards to women.

Towards the end, there is a scene in front of the gate of Eguchi temple on which is written the Buddhist motto *gu ei issho* 俱会一处, meaning the hope of meeting all the deities of the Pure Land after death. Here, Yūko feels that all the people she knows and she does not know, men and women, dead and alive, are gathered together around her, reunited to help her mother's spirit gain salvation. It is important to note that Yūko initially resists the idea of being united with men, especially the one she meets on the shore in Eguchi, who is concerned about diseases and whom she despises. But in the end, she overcomes this rigidity of thought and aspires to spiritual unification with all human beings.⁶¹

55. Ibid., 21, 70.

56. Ibid., 111.

57. Sugii, 'kioku' to 'yume' to', 140.

58. Saegusa, 'Eguchi suieki', 25.

59. Ibid., 113.

60. Ibid., 73.

61. Ibid., 102.

The implication is that neither the apparently free life of a geisha like her mother (before she fell into the trap of marriage), nor the apparently serene life of a wife like her aunt, are destined to happiness and satisfaction. This in turn reveals the sad reality that both are lives constrained by the patriarchal system. There still is no other choice available between the archetype of the prostitute and the mother, because they are two sides of the same coin. But at the same time, there is also no other choice for the pitiful men constrained either to live a life of crime like Yukie's husband—who became an alcoholic and started threatening his wife to obtain money and sex—or to assume family responsibilities they probably do not wish for such as the absent father of Yūko, as much as soldiers did not desire to go to war and die young for the sake of their country.

The woman-as-prostitute, universalized through this narration—and finally embodied in the image of the courtesan of Eguchi—is ambivalently free from patriarchal schemes, but at the same time still victim of them. Initially it is only Yūko who is not portrayed as a victim, but in the end she also succumbs to the universal sadness by feeling in herself the pain of all subjugated women and even of subjugating men, embodied in the scene of the gang rape. Yūko understands that despite her efforts to live a different life, free from hegemonic gender roles, she is part of it, as much as every other woman and every man as well.

I find it necessary to analyze at this point the unexpected ending. Throughout the narration, Yūko insists on the fact that she wants to live longer than her mother and her aunt did in order to redeem the struggles they had to endure as women and live a serene life.⁶² Nevertheless after witnessing the girl's rape, Yūko commits suicide. One explanation could be shock, but it is not likely in this narration because of the mild empathy with which Yūko sees the scene. On the contrary, she accepts male domination and violence as a 'natural' thing (*tōzen na koto no yōni uketome* 当然なことのようによけ止), and leaves the girl to suffer her destiny without helping her. I read this suicide as an act committed from a stance of resignation, and not out of a sense of guilt for not having helped the girl. It is the same resignation that kills her will to live any longer than the other women of her family. She initially felt that her prostitute-ness, which was a source of pride for her, would help her resist the old patriarchal schemes. But after having learned about her mother's life, she starts to understand that the *shōfusei* is not enough to fight patriarchy and it is not a valid alternative. Moreover, when the girl is raped to death, her initially courageous choice to meet two guys to have sex with, her attempt to be free from patriarchal schemes, ends up being her death penalty. Yūko realizes that whatever violence they are victim of, it is not resistance that the women in the narration attain, but pain. Moreover the sense of motherly pity they have towards men transforms them into bodhisattva-like figures, devoid of any subversive power, and confirms an androcentric agenda.

Conclusion

In my opinion, the hyperbolic contrast between Woman and Man emerging from *Eguchi suieki* at the beginning of the 1980s, strikingly anachronistic to readers of the post-gender era, takes the value of allegorically stressing what still had to be done to achieve equal treatment in society, emphasizing the dichotomy precisely in a period when bit by bit women were starting to gain a higher place in society, while at the same time they were still subjugated on the role of housewife.⁶³ Also the overall positive view of prostitution emerging from the work is obviously problematic, but challenges any taken-for-granted position among feminist activists, who do not generally agree with the idea of sex work as a free and empowering choice.⁶⁴ By falsifying her

62. Ibid., 63, 71.

63. See Sandra Buckley, 'Altered States. The Body Politics of 'Being-Woman'', in *Postwar Japan as History*, ed. Andrew Gordon (University of California Press, 1993), 369, and Ueno Chizuko, 'The Japanese Women's Movement: The Counter-Values to Industrialism', in *The Japanese Trajectory: Modernization and Beyond*, ed. Gavan McCormack and Yoshio Sugimoto (Cambridge University Press, 1988), 170.

64. Klemperer-Markman, *PostGender*, 230.

quotation of Hirota's documentary, Saegusa creates a subversion of the image of the war prostitute from victim to active participant of the comfort-women system. This has the effect of obliging readers to reconsider the image of the prostitute in general and introduces the principle of prostitute-ness as a free and independent part of every woman. After that, Saegusa denies in the same text the subversive potential of prostitute-ness, seeing it as intimately linked to mother-ness. She inserts some quotations and scenes from the noh *Eguchi* which have the effect of reestablishing the prostitute image, but at the same time of embodying the restoration of patriarchal order with the transfiguration of the prostitute figure into a merciful bodhisattva.

The fact of using the medium of noh, an established traditional performing art, to link the images of many women and create an eternal figure of Woman, has a double effect. From one point of view the essential prostitute-ness of Woman is legitimated by the use in fiction of the overall positive image of Eguchi coming from noh. On the other hand, the transformation of Eguchi into Fugen Bosatsu as a necessary passage to Enlightenment represents a loss of strength in the image of the prostitute per se. In other words, the ambiguity of political incorrectness comes to the fore through the intertextuality with noh, which at first is provocatively used to glorify prostitute-ness, but later confirms the fragility of this concept, always coming together with mother-ness, embodied in Fugen Bosatsu. In the end prostitute-ness is not a means of earning freedom from patriarchal society, and the sadness and death of the women in the narration is the result of this consciousness.

Saegusa risked broaching such a delicate topic as comfort women in this provocative way is probably because Saegusa could not foresee the wave of revisionist arguments after the topic became popular at the beginning of the 1990s. It is likely she did not suspect that the problems the former comfort women had to endure after the war would have been stubbornly denied by revisionists, who 'undermined the seriousness of the crime'.⁶⁵

In my opinion, the politically incorrect choice in *Eguchi suieki* of avoiding approaching the topic of comfort women in a broad and insightful way does not have to be read literally as a trivialization of the terrible exploitation suffered by most of the women at the front. I read it as a way to create through the medium of literary narration the essence of prostitute-ness, as a move to provoke readers and to oblige them to rethink women's position in society, especially in comparison with the traditional marriage system and the gender roles implied in it. Ultimately both metatexts are used to stress an idea which was very common in postwar female writing: the quest for the annihilation of the 'good wife wise mother' image, and the deep need to rethink gender roles in Japanese society.⁶⁶ I think that nowadays, after almost forty years, this work is still worth reading for its ironic and sharp view of Japanese society where, more than the 'curse of Eguchi', it is the phantom of the 'good wife and wise mother' that is still menacing women's position in society and their independence, as well as men's freedom.

65. Kimura Maki, *Unfolding the 'Comfort Women' Debates. Modernity, Violence, Women's Voices* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 127.

66. Julia C. Bullock, *The Other Women's Lib. Gender and Body in Japanese Women's Fiction* (University of Hawai'i Press, 2010), 2.